

Don Peracchi: Sen. Boxer, again there's no water and lives are at stake

By Don
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Anyone who says city leaders aren't focused on water conservation would be wrong. A very low Millerton Lake is a reminder of the need to cut back.

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For the second year in a row, California farmers will not receive any water from the Central Valley Project. The announcement Friday from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation that more than 1 million acres of highly productive farmland will once again receive a zero allocation of water this year should make one thing abundantly clear.

The federal government's Central Valley Project is broken. Its failure threatens the continued coordination of local, state and federal water agencies in operating the modern water system on which all of California depends. As a result, some of the most vital elements of the state's economy are being allowed to wither and die.

It is easy to blame this failure on the drought. But that is only a little bit true. There is no question that dry conditions in 2014 and 2015 have contributed to the crisis. But the Central Valley Project was designed and built precisely for the purpose of alleviating the effects of far more serious droughts than what we are experiencing today.

From 1987 through 1992, for example, in the midst of another prolonged drought that makes the current dry conditions pale in comparison, Reclamation was able to deliver 100%, 100%, 100%, 50%, 25%, and 25% of its normal allocations in each of those years.

Indeed, when Reclamation designed the Central Valley Project, it calculated how much water the system could reliably deliver even during a repeat of the most extreme drought that California suffered, from 1928 to 1934. And Reclamation based its decision on how much water it could make available to farmers under long-term contracts on that calculation.

Contrast that with the failure we are facing today. In 2013, a mere two years after the torrential rains we all experienced in 2011, the Central Valley Project was only able to deliver 20% of its normal supplies to farmers south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. And in 2014, Reclamation was not only unable to deliver any water to farmers, it could not even meet the “core demands” of its contractual obligation to senior water right holders on the San Joaquin River and its statutory obligation to managed wetlands.

Now, in 2015, we are told that the water supply conditions will be even worse than in 2014.

Why is the Central Valley Project no longer capable of fulfilling the basic purposes for which it was built? Don't blame the drought. There is no question that new federal rules and regulations restricting the flow of water have contributed greatly to the human suffering that will occur in this third year of nearly zero or grossly inadequate allocations.

And what is particularly tragic is that these new rules and regulations, which are intended to benefit threatened fish species, are based on conjecture and unproven theories that have done nothing to protect fish populations. Instead, fish populations continue to decline.

The governor has a plan for addressing California's water crisis, and the public's support for the water bonds last year is helping to implement it. But the breakdown in the Central Valley Project is not a problem that can be solved in Sacramento by the long-term solutions proposed in the governor's plan. Fortunately California's leaders from both political parties in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives have been working together for more than a year on legislation that would help to restore reliability to our water system to protect the economy and the environment.

In 1992, when Barbara Boxer first ran for the Senate, she challenged Californians to stand up for the issues they cared about. “Where are the voices?” she asked. “Where's the spine? Where's the anger? This isn't about some theory. This is about (people's) lives.”

Friday was a very sad day for the people in California and all over the country who depend on food grown by farmers who receive water from the Central Valley Project. Friday was a very sad day for the workers who will be without jobs because farmers have no water. And Friday was a very sad day for the environment, which will continue to decline because federal agencies trusted with protecting at-risk fish species are content to tie the hands of project operators whose mission is delivering water for human needs, while these same agencies do nothing to address the numerous factors that limit fish populations.

As she winds up her long career in public service, Sen. Boxer's questions are just as vital as ever. Where are the voices? Where's the spine? Where's the anger? This isn't about some theory. This is about people's lives.

Don Peracchi is president of the Westlands Board of Directors and farms on the west side of Fresno County.